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THE SECOND YEAR OF THE WAR

BY

HILAIRE BELLOC

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The Second Year of the War

By HILAIRE BELLOC

The second year of the war opened with the enemy strongly upon the defensive in the West and more than half way through his advance across Poland in the East. But, much more important than the geographical situation, it opened with the enemy still in possession of very large reserves of men (the details I shall turn to in a moment); while on the West the immense potential numerical margin of Great Britain had not yet come into play, and on the East, not only equipment for men, but the most necessary munitionment was lacking.

That second year ends with the enemy partly upon the offensive, partly upon the defensive in the West; upon the defensive in the main upon the East, and having lost there two belts of territory, the one some 130 miles deep, the other some 50 miles. It sees the enemy much where

he stood before upon the Italian front ; in the Balkans very far extended, occupying all Montenegro and Serbia, and with the Bulgarian forces as his ally. It further sees the attempt upon the Dardanelles abandoned and the original force in Mesopotamia captive.

As against this it sees a considerable advance of the Russians from the Caucasus, such that they now hold the whole of Armenia.

THE MEANING OF THE MAP.

Were the future student of history to reckon, as do some of our contemporaries, by the map, what could he make of the contrast ? Nothing at all. He could only tell you that the line in the West upon the second anniversary of the Declaration of War ran everywhere within a few yards of its trace twelve months before. Upon a little sector in front of Verdun it would show an enemy crescent gain at the deepest of four miles, feathering down to nothing. In the Champagne a similar belt, but less deep ; another, smaller in extent, in Picardy, and the recent indentation some 15 miles long by five only at its deepest point in Picardy would

complete the apparently trifling story of the change.

Turning to the East he would see that though the recent Russian offensive had gained the salient of Lutsk and that of the Bukovina, yet the advance from the Vistula which had taken place in the beginning of these twelve months much more than compensated for such a recent loss, and that the lines as a whole stood at the extreme point to which the enemy had pushed them when his advance was exhausted last autumn.

Against the Russian occupation of territory in Armenia he would set the enemy's in the Balkans. His conclusion would be no more than a confused idea that upon the balance, if anything, the enemy had gained.

But everyone who is following the realities of the great war, from those who merely follow it as students in the Press to those who are actually conducting it in the Higher Commands of the Allies and of our opponents, knows very well that a calculus of this kind based upon the territory held upon the map, is valueless.

THE TRUE CRITERION.

The true basis of judgment is the balance upon either side of the principal theatre of war of equipped and fully munitioned units. It is the number of men actually trained and in the field and provided with all arms; their rate of wastage, their command of increased or diminishing munitionment, the rate at which they can produce and put into action and feed their chief weapons—these are the factors and the only factors that count.

ENEMY ON THE DEFENSIVE.

The enemy is everywhere upon the defensive—a situation to which he will make exceptions by attempted counter-offensives, but which in its general lines now imposes itself upon him. He no longer can count upon one portion of that which hems him round lacking in munitionment. He no longer can count upon a maintenance of armies in the field equivalent in number to his opponents, and the whole scheme of the great war represented as a complex of strains is reversed in August, 1916, from what it was in August, 1915. The pressure is

everywhere inwards against the siege fortress of the Central Powers. The sortie is everywhere less and less probable and less and less fruitful. The points upon which attack could be delivered upon the perimeter increase indefinitely in number. The strength in equipped and munitioned units with which such attacks must be met is declining. What was the vast potential reserve of British man-power has now become actual. The corresponding reserve of Russian man-power which could not be realised from lack of equipment during so many months is now realised at last. The inferiority in munitionment has turned to at least an equality which is rapidly becoming a superiority upon the part of the Allies. And we have clearly entered, no matter what its total length may prove to be, the last phase of the Great War. Nothing can modify its now fatal quality save political disturbances within the group of Powers which, when the Central Empires first attacked, were so gravely inferior : which have reduced first their numerical, later their mechanical inferiority by so laborious a process, but which are now clearly masters of the game.

DECISION OF THE MARNE.

Roughly speaking, then, the Great War has passed through these phases :

A First Phase in which the victory of Powers far more numerous in the field than their opponents and enjoying the advantage of surprise, was morally assured. This First Phase was concluded and the ambitions of Prussia ruined in the first six weeks of hostilities by the Battle of the Marne. Those who said that the Great War when it should break out would be a short matter were wrong. But the idea underlying that judgment, the idea that some decision would rapidly determine what ultimate victory was to be was right.

THE DOOM OF PRUSSIA.

The Marne decided the course of the war, shaped its destiny, moulded its character. After the Marne the vast resources which Prussia could command, her control of armies still enormously superior to her opponents and of mechanical resources and provision in metal and every other requisite for war more striking still, were, in spite of that

superiority, doomed. The forces Prussia represented and could control were engaged. And from the 14th of September, 1914, onwards nothing could save her save some political accident ; a quarrel among her opponents ; a separate peace ; a revolution. The mere military factors had become the calculable things they always are in a siege, and the end was certain.

THE STRUGGLE AT YPRES.

There came a Second Phase, in which all the efforts of Prussia were centred upon breaking out. Its characteristic action was the first Great Battle of Ypres. The effort failed. And through the ensuing winter and spring two processes went on side by side. The first, the effort of the men ; the second, the effort of all parties, the Allies and the enemy, to provide that enormously increased munitionment, particularly of munitionment for the heavy guns, which the unexpected character the war had now taken on rendered necessary.

THE EFFORT OF THE MEN.

In the first of these tasks the Allied programme was completed within the

course of the year. The tide in numbers had turned before the year was concluded, and the Italians joining the Allies in the month of June, 1915, accentuated this new state of things. But its value which had other things been equal might have given us final success before the close of that year, was modified by the inability of one portion of the Allies in an isolated and separate field, to keep up with the rate of munitionment the new and unexpected rate which modern war demanded.

MUNITIONS: A GERMAN OPPORTUNITY.

Though success in the West might now be finally denied to the Central Powers, the enormous discrepancy between the Germanic power of mechanical production and that of Russia, gave an opportunity for separate action towards the East.

THE DRIVE THROUGH POLAND.

Prussia, now in control of all the forces of the Central Powers, was not slow to seize that opportunity, and there followed the great drive through Poland

which reduced almost to exhaustion the originally insufficient equipment and munitionment of our Russian Ally.

That drive was undertaken, not for the occupation of territory, but for the destruction of the Russian armies. They were saved, as we know, by the skill of the retreat, though only at the expense of terrible losses in men and in instruments of war, and at the expense, as I have said, of exhaustion, especially in the munitionment of heavy pieces, the hardest of all to replace in a country imperfectly industrialised.

The Second Year of the War opened with this attempt to impose a separate peace upon a defeated Russia in full swing. Already the line of the Vistula was reached and the capital of Poland occupied. The advance continued throughout August. It reached the line of the Great Marshes in the centre, entered Volhynia in the south, and in the north made its last supreme (and much its greatest) effort to arrive at a decision before its energy should be spent and a change in the season should render further operations impossible.

VILNA SALIENT

That great attempt may be known to history by the name of the Vilna salient. Distant as the operation now is in time, and loosely as it was followed in the west, we shall do well to note it carefully, for it was a turning point in the whole history of the campaign ; and the failure of the enemy here was followed by a whole series of changes which led up to the latest phase of the war.

Throughout the Polish advance the attempt upon the part of the enemy to obtain a decision had been the simple one of attacking in strength with massed heavy artillery at two distant points, compelling a Russian retreat at each of these points, and so producing a salient between them. The salient once produced, the next effort was to cut off the neck of the salient, to press in upon either side and thus envelop the Russian forces within the bulge. Several such salients had been produced by the enemy in his advance ; in each case he had failed to grasp the Russian forces thus threatened above and below. The attempt to capture the Russian forces

within the great Vilna salient in the middle of September was the most serious of all. The salient began to appear upon the map in the first ten days of September. It grew pronounced in the following week and round about the 17th or 18th of the month, those who were following the progress of the German envelopment remarked with astonishment to the north of Vilna an extremely rapid advance day by day which could only indicate the use of cavalry. As a matter of fact, it was later learnt that by far the largest body of cavalry in this war had been launched by the Germans to the north of Vilna : No less than 40,000 sabres accompanied by 140 mounted pieces swarmed all up the higher portions of the Vilia River and all but enveloped the great Russian forces within the curve. It was a curiously daring performance and, as the event turned out, a perfectly futile one. Something like one-half of this great force was lost in the ensuing week. Cavalry is, of all the arms, the most delicate to handle ; its rapid action at the beginning of any strategic movement where it can be used is modified by the enormous supply of the horses needed, and already as early as the

16th of September the difficulty of that supply had begun to be felt. During the 17th, 18th and 19th, the Russian armies within the Vilna salient were retiring. They were destroying, with greater and greater ease upon their flank, with each succeeding day, the now scattered remnants of the cavalry to the north.

THE DRIVE FAILS.

The enemy entered Vilna town upon the 18th, but he had lost his objective which was not the town but the armies which had been grouped in its neighbourhood. A great portion of our Press in England still expressed anxiety for the fate of the retiring Russian force. That anxiety was ill-timed. The last of the great Austro-German strokes had failed, and before the beginning of October the line of the enemy in the east was established precisely where it was to be found unchanged until the great offensive delivered upon its southern part by the Russians in the beginning of June in the present year.

A FAMOUS PHRASE.

Lord Kitchener put the matter simply and in words the accuracy of which

could be gauged by the exasperation they caused at Berlin, when he said that the enemy had now in the East "shot his bolt." It was a phrase exactly true. The expense in men, the difficulty of bringing up munitionment ; the entry into territories with worse roads and less opportunities of supply ; the fact that the line now reached and cut by the great belt of marshes in the centre—all these things between them brought the great adventure to a stand. It had in four months advanced over a belt of territory averaging 100 miles in width ; it had exhausted Russian munitionment ; cost the Russians many hundreds of thousands of men missing as prisoners and a corresponding proportion of wounded and of dead. It had cost them in mechanical appliances little of their field artillery, but a vast proportion of their existing rifles and machine guns. It was thought a paradox by many when, with the opening of that October last, all competent judgment affirmed that the Austro-German stroke had failed. Yet, if military terms have any meaning, it had failed, and that great advance with all its tactical successes was strategically a defeat. For its one

object had been and could only have been the destruction of the Russian armies, or at least of some large portion of the Russian armies. For this had it formed over and over again its great salients. Each of these it had attempted to cut off so as to secure a decision, and every one of those attempts had failed until the last and crowning failure at Vilna completed the story.

THE SEPTEMBER OFFENSIVE.

Meanwhile, against the western line where the Germans stood upon the defensive, there had been undertaken by the French and British combined, a very vigorous offensive movement in Champagne and in Flanders. Two attacks were undertaken contemporaneously and in co-ordination one with the other, and launched in the hope of breaking the German defence in France and Belgium.

This attack in the West had been thus delayed mainly on account of the desire to accumulate as large a head of shell as possible before it should be delivered. To have attacked much later when the weather would have changed and when

the enemy could have brought back his troops from the East, would have been an error, although it would have permitted a still larger accumulation of shell. It was hoped that the existing head of shell would be sufficient for the task, and the amount was calculated upon what the enemy had delivered in his successful attack upon the lines of the Dunajetz five months before.

But there was this great difference between the two situations : That in the attack upon the Russians the Austro-Germans were delivering their great masses of shell against an enemy very ill provided with heavy guns and almost at the end of his stock of munitions, while the offensive of the Allies in the West was being delivered against an enemy whose power of munitionment was still superior to our men.

The plan devised by the French Higher Command had in it one element of novelty. The points upon which a special effort was to be made had, of course, required long preparation, and had probably been noted by the enemy already. But the enemy was deceived in some degree by

18 THE SECOND YEAR OF THE WAR

many days of heavy bombardment all along the line from the Vosges right up to the sea. And when the attack itself was delivered this bombardment had only just ceased.

It was upon the morning of Saturday, September 25th, that the two blows were struck.

FRENCH EFFORT IN CHAMPAGNE.

The chief effort undertaken by the French in Champagne was over a total front of about 17 miles, from the village of Auberive to the market town of Ville sur Tourbe just outside the Argonne Forest. The attack was delivered in mass, was expensive and, though causing surprisingly heavy losses to the enemy (as was ascertained later from captured documents and an analysis of his lists) it did not attain its main object. It carried the first German line in 48 hours, with many thousand unwounded prisoners and over thirty guns, but beyond that real progress could not be made.

LOOS AND ITS LESSONS.

Almost exactly the same thing on a smaller scale had been carried out by the

British with certain French contingents to the south of them in the region between La Bassee and Lens, in which Loos has given its name to the action as a whole. This attack was struck upon a front of 6 to $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles. It penetrated far into the German defences, and at one point it reached Hill 70, cutting the La Bassee and the Lens road, but it did not shift the German line as a whole, still less permanently pierce it, while to the south the French just north of Arras had a similar imperfect success. They approached to and in places reached the heights dominating the Plains of Lens, but could go no further.

The true cause of this halt and of the failure of the Allies in the West to pierce or even considerably shift the enemy's line was that the head of shell accumulated was insufficient for the task. After the striking of the first blow an intensive bombardment was no longer possible. All that could be done was to press on expensively with infantry for several days, to resist counter-attacks from the counter-concentration the enemy had brought up, and then to put an end to the operation.

This double offensive in the West, though it failed to achieve its main object, had three considerable consequences. It compelled the enemy to increase the number of effectives he was keeping upon the Western line; much more important, it showed that the deep digging and the whole system of the enemy's defensive was useless against intensive fire, and that with that advantage one found him surrendering readily, and if anything less fit for the strain than his opponents. Thirdly, and much the most important of all, the failure taught both sides lessons, which the enemy was to apply later at Verdun, and the Allies in a far more developed form in the great attack delivered upon the Somme nine months later.

Roughly speaking, these lessons were as follows :

MORE SHELLS NEEDED.

It had been proved that one great hammer blow against a line thoroughly held and indefinitely munitioned would not succeed in breaking that line. The method for the future against equal armament must be a method of continued application;

bombardment succeeding upon bombardment and advance upon advance. In other words, there would have to be prepared before any such offensive in the future, a vastly greater quantity of shell than had hitherto been thought necessary.

HOW TO BREAK THE LINE.

Nor was it probable that the actual breaking of the line would follow even the success of such new methods. The front might be broken, but the line would re-form behind. To pierce at one or two narrow points, such as had actually been done at Champagne and at Loos was useless. The enemy's artillery upon either flank would render the gap untenable for the offensive. The object, therefore, of a great offensive in the future as against equally armed forces would be by successive stages to wear down the opponent, create as it were a great sore in his lines and either there or in some second selected place, whence he had been compelled to draw troops, to compel his retirement. Once that retirement should begin it was hoped that it could be so vigorously pressed as to make it unstable, and ultimately ruinous.

18, 847

We shall see how these lessons were applied at Verdun and how, having been insufficiently learnt by the enemy, he was defeated before Verdun under circumstances necessarily disastrous to his cause.

ENEMY RESERVES.

With this month of October is reached a turning point in the story of the year, the nature of which turning point should be closely examined.

The Central Empires had, during the whole of the summer of 1915, ample reserve in every sense of that term. A reserve of man-power which permitted drafts to be continually reaching the depots ; a strategic reserve, that is, units equipped, trained, munitioned and ready for the field, but kept back from it to be thrown in when occasion should offer. And they had, until the middle of the summer, fallen back upon no abnormal methods of recruitment. They had, in other words, convinced themselves that the forces they had detached for merely holding the Italian and the French fronts were sufficient, and that a decision could

be obtained against the Russians with their ample forces set in motion towards the East and backed by ample reserves in the depots behind.

TEUTONIC MISCALCULATION.

In the first of these surmises they were justified. In the second they were not. They had indeed, as we have seen, successfully held the Italian and the French fronts. But they had used up great masses of men in the attempt to compel Russia to a separate peace, and they found themselves in this month of October, 1915, with their advance at an end and a separate peace with Russia no nearer than before. What was to be their future policy ? By what efforts could they now postpone or anticipate the inevitable growth of the Allies' power of munitionment, the slower rate of which had alone given them in the particular case of Russia their recent opportunities ?

ENEMY MAN-POWER.

In order to answer this question we must appreciate how the Central Powers stood for men. We can test this point by what we now know of the German

recruitment. For Austria-Hungary being somewhat more exhausted all along than the German Empire on account of her great initial losses against the Russians at the beginning of the war, whatever phase of exhaustion we find in the German Empire we may be certain is to be found accentuated in Austria-Hungary at the same time.

German recruitment then, to take that test, stood as follows :

Up to about the period when the line of the Vistula was reached and Warsaw occupied, German recruitment had depended upon nothing but normal sources of supply, and so long as a field force is dependent upon normal sources of supply for its recruitment, one cannot say that even the first stages of exhaustion had begun.

NORMAL SOURCES OF SUPPLY.

What do we mean by normal sources of supply ? A conscript nation going to war has at its disposal all able bodied men. It counts as mature and able to give a maximum percentage for the field the lads who are in their 21st year.

From that year up to about 40 it "mobilises"; that is, turns yearly to purposes of war its male population.

In conscript countries each yearly relay of young men called to arms is named a Class, and each such Class is designated by the year in which the men composing it attain their 20th birthday. The later in the year we call out the Class the larger the proportion who will be over 20, and the earlier in the year the smaller the proportion. It is generally allowed that calling out these young men, all of them well over 19 and many of them over 20, is part of the normal recruitment of a conscript force.

As a matter of fact, in time of peace men do not start their training until a year later. The Germans who marched into France, for instance, in 1914, were, the youngest of them (excluding the Volunteers), not 20 but 21 years of age.

ABNORMAL RECRUITMENT BEGINS.

Well, in the first year of the war the Germans had called up Class 1914 during November and December. And during May and June of 1915 they had called

up Class 1915. While the advance through Poland was in progress the first abnormal recruitment began and the German Empire "borrowed" as it were the young men who were normally only due next year. They called up 1916 Class during August and September. The various portions of this Class belonging to various States of the German Empire were called up at different times, but all were under training by the entry into October which I have called the first critical point in the second year.

THE WASTAGE OF WAR.

It should, of course, be clearly understood that the losses in a war of this sort—enormously heavier than anyone had dreamt of when the old calculations were made in time of peace—far exceed the recruiting power of a nation. The rate of absolute loss of an army in the field has proved in the course of the war to fluctuate between 4 per cent. and 6 per cent. per month. The conscript recruiting power of the same army is, even in the mature classes, under 1 per cent. per month. Roughly speaking the rate of wastage has proved to be four to five

times as rapid as the maximum possible rate of recruitment.

But there is another abnormal source of recruitment to which a conscript nation can turn when the phase of exhaustion begins to appear, and that second abnormal source is the calling up of men hitherto rejected for physical reasons. It is an even better proof of the need for men than the calling up of immature classes, and it is remarkable that in this same month of October the German Empire first began "combing out" as the phrase goes, all those who had been previously classed as unfit.

GERMANY'S NEW SITUATION.

From the above we discover that this moment, the entry into the month October, 1915, marked in every way a change in the enemy's situation.

He was beginning to enter a new state of affairs with regard to his man power, and upon that his next plans would depend. He had hoped for a decision in the East before reaching such straits ; he had failed to achieve that decision

and he must now consider some alternative.

How did he stand as against his opponents ?

These opponents were four in number of the great Powers with the Serbian and a fraction of the original Belgian forces among the smaller Powers.

THE STRENGTH OF ITALY.

The Italian forces were possessed, he knew, of a very large reserve indeed. The enemy believed that the Italian armies in the field would do little more for many months than "hold" some twenty to twenty-five Austrian divisions upon either frontier. But he knew that the factor of wastage would here be of no significance in his own favour; though the Italians should do no more than "hold" from twenty to twenty-five Austrian divisions, yet they could go on holding those forces indefinitely.

WHAT OF FRANCE

France he knew to be more or less in the same stage of exhaustion as himself. The French had the discipline and courage

to refuse casualty lists. The enemy's information was therefore always imperfect. As it is in his character to exaggerate his own chances, he correspondingly exaggerated the exhaustion of the French and believed the French losses to have been greater than they were—an error in which the French by every means in their power continued to lead him. There remained the Russian and the English.

BRITISH AND RUSSIAN RESERVES.

Now the Russian and the English were, in different degrees, unknown quantities to the German General Staff, though for very different reasons. The British offensive power in the future was an unknown quantity because they had no data from which to judge the probable success of the British authorities in training, officering and staffing perfectly new armies formed from material hitherto quite ignorant of war and of military affairs.

BRITAIN'S MIGHT MISJUDGED.

As they always do, the German Higher Command under-estimated their

enemy. They did not believe that for a full year, or, at any rate, not until well into the summer of 1916, would Great Britain be able to produce a formidable offensive force in mere numbers, and when or if those mere numbers should appear, they were confident that the difficulties of officering such a force and the impossibilities of giving it fully trained staffs would leave it incapable of arriving at any decision in the West. The English power of equipment, upon the other hand, they did not under-estimate, for they knew the industrial capacities of Great Britain and they appreciated the strength of the British Fleet and its power of keeping the sea open for the obtaining of munitionment and material from neutral markets—notably from the United States. 18, 847

Upon the whole they under-estimated even this factor in the growth of the British power, but they still more under-estimated the probable offensive strength of British personnel after winter and spring should be passed.

BERLIN'S CONTEMPT OF RUSSIA.

What of Russia? Here the enemy's

Higher Command estimated that two factors would gravely modify the value of the large numerical reserves possessed by this particular opponent. The first of these factors was the difficulty of re-equipping, re-arming, re-munitioning, Russia. The Dardanelles was closed. Archangel would be closed during the whole winter. Vladivostock, though kept artificially open during the winter, was at a distance of 6,000 miles from the scene of conflict and united with it by but one line of railway, while all munitionment coming in from these very distant points must first also pass over many thousands miles of sea. Further, it was believed that disorganisation within the Russian State would gravely delay the re-arming of the forces.

The second factor upon which the enemy relied in this case was the difficulty Russia would find in officering her new armies. More than half the original forces, fully trained as they had been, were gone. To find appropriate leadership for the completely new bodies which would next appear would be a difficult task. It was probably imagined at Berlin

that it would be if not impossible, at any rate, the cause of quite immoderate delay. We know from a hundred officially-inspired articles in the German Press, from the whole tone of their neutral propaganda, and indeed from their military dispositions, that the enemy's Higher Command regarded the Russian army as incapable of serious offensive action for at least a year—that is, throughout all useful months of 1916.

GERMAN PLANS IN OCTOBER.

One may sum up and say that the enemy in this turning point, the month of October, 1915, looked upon the whole field of war somewhat as follows :

He knew that in the long run newly-equipped armies and newly-raised millions would bring the balance at least even, but he thought that the delay would be prolonged by at least a year ; in the case of Russia by more than a year. He proposed so to act as, first, to bring in further effectives in alliance with his own ; in other words, to undertake a campaign which, though it might be called purely political and should subserve no directly

military object, would have the military advantage of giving him a further recruitment in numbers. Secondly, to create disarray in the plans of one or more of his opponents by threatening them unexpectedly in distant parts of their dominions. Thirdly, to strike hard while yet there was time at the most militarily formidable of his opponents, the only fully mobilised conscript great Power with which he had had to deal, the French.

The French were, luckily for him, normally only one-third of his own strength. And though he was here meeting what he regarded as equals, he hoped to meet them with overwhelming numbers before his exhaustion should have gone too far.

THE FOE TESTS HIS SCHEME.

This combined scheme he began putting in order at once in this same month of October, 1915, when he saw that the separate peace with Russia was hopeless, and that his anxieties in recruitment were beginning.

He first withdrew from his still ample forces in the West six divisions which

he put into the interior and subjected to a special training, to form the spear head of the blow he intended to strike against the French in the early part of the next year. He designed to give these six divisions between three and four months of repose from fighting and of exercise peculiar to the task they would have to undertake. His plans even included a special scale of victualling for these bodies !

BULGARIA RECEIVES THE SIGNAL.

Next, he informed the King of Bulgaria that an attack upon Serbia was planned. The King of Bulgaria had been secretly in alliance with the Central Empires for some months, and only waited a signal to come into the field. It was Austria which had denied Bulgaria the fruits of her victories in the Balkan War ; it was due to Austria that Serbia had not been granted those Albanian territories which were her goal and an outlet upon the Adriatic. It had been due to Austria that those territories where Serbia proper, Greece and Bulgaria join, which are mainly Bulgarian in population, had not been granted to Bulgaria, as the secret

Treaty between the Balkan States agreed, but had been put under Serbian rule. There is, therefore, something tragically ironical in the fact that Bulgaria now entered into the war upon Austria's side for the destruction of Serbia.

MIXED OBJECTS OF SERBIAN CAMPAIGN.

It was evident that with these forces at play, a strong Austro-German attack from the north, and a Bulgarian attack from in flank, the position of the Serbian Army was untenable. It was equally evident that the overrunning of all Serbia could not possibly give a decision to the enemy, nor even approach the end of the war. What it could do was to open a highway to unite the Central Empires and their Ally Turkey, whom they could now amply provision, while it was just possible that the absence of a censorship in England would allow panic, or at any rate some disarray, to arise when uninstructed opinion should note the presence of the Central Powers at Constantinople, and the possibility apparent only to men insignificant in judgment but numerous and powerful, that Egypt might be

threatened. It is even conceivable that the more foolish and extravagant might have fears for India. Further, the entry of Bulgaria upon the enemy's side shut in Roumania and made that neutral, whose national sympathies were opposed to the Central Empires, incapable of movement for the moment; while it was possible the overrunning of Serbia would give the Prussian Court in Athens an excuse for turning against the Allies.

SERBIA SUBMERGED.

With these mixed objects in view—only indirectly military, and a clear proof that decisive military success was no longer possible—the enemy opened his bombardment across the Danube, upon the 3rd of October. By the 14th November the whole Serbian territory was in the hands of the Austro-Germans and the Bulgarian, and Montenegrin as well.

COUNTERSTROKE AT SALONIKA.

But meanwhile the Allies had very wisely undertaken the occupation of the Port of Salonika. They had even advanced from this base with a small

force up the Vardar Valley so long as there appeared any chance at all of the remnants of the Serbian army effecting a junction with them. But that army had delayed too long in the north, in the vain hope to hold impossible positions ; it had been compelled to retreat westward across the mountains, and though more than half of it was saved to fight side by side with the Allies in the ensuing year, it lost all its artillery and all the territory it had desired to save, and the small Anglo-French force which had pushed up into the mountains fell back again upon Salonika.

FRUITS OF A WISE MOVE.

Though it had effected nothing to change the local military situation, the phrase "very wisely" which I have used in connection with the decision to occupy Salonika, has already been justified.

In the first place, had not the Allies occupied Salonika it would directly or indirectly have been made without a doubt a naval base for the service of the enemy, and it is the only port on the

European side of the Ægean capable of serving as such a base.

Next, the presence of an increasing force at Salonika, had upon any plans the Germans might have had of action towards the East, the same effect which a man behind a door with a loaded gun has upon those who would pass that door. It did not prevent Germany from munitioning the Turks and adventuring certain forces Eastward in alliance with the Turkish armies, but it prevented any large effort towards the East by the enemy, which could not be undertaken until this threat upon the flank of its communications should be reduced.

In the third place, as the garrison of Salonika grew to formidable dimensions, it immobilised and counterpoised the whole of the Bulgarian forces.

To these three points we might add a fourth, political one ; the occupation of Salonika effectively restrained the Prussia sympathies of the Court at Athens.

Meanwhile, the enemy's occupation of Serbia and the opportunities of Bulgaria upon his side had a political effect among

the Allies proportionate to the weakness or absence of a proper censorship. This led, for some time at least, to a dangerous military result : The locking up of forces in Egypt, who were therefore of no service, and the attempt to effect a political coup in the Tigris Valley and against Bagdad with grossly insufficient forces.

GALLIPOLI.

CAUSES OF FAILURE.

It was clear to all considered judgment long before this date that the attempt to force the Turkish lines in the Gallipoli Peninsula would be impossible unless there could be brought against them the same weight of metal as permitted the carrying of trenches in any other field of this new trench warfare. The Turkish lines defending the Narrows of the Dardanelles could not be forced unless the 7,000 yards of their trace were subjected to a bombardment at least as heavy as that which carried the first two lines before Loos. Even a head of shell and the presence of heavy pieces as numerous as that which had been at work in Champagne and before Loos in September would only

doubtfully have carried the Turkish lines. It was clear, therefore, that the operation must either be treated as the main British operation of the war for the moment, provided with the corresponding number of heavy guns and an immense reserve of munitionment, or abandoned. Unfortunately neither of these alternatives was faced. The expedition was starved of artillery and its success rendered impossible, but the authorities hesitated to withdraw, partly from fear of the great losses that might attend such an operation, partly from fear of the result upon Oriental opinion ; partly from inertia.

A BRILLIANT WITHDRAWAL.

It was not until the ninth of January that the operation of withdrawal was effected. But when it was, it was carried out with the most complete and indeed amazing success, almost without casualties, and in the briefest possible time. A portion of the forces hitherto locked up in that expensive and insufficiently supported experiment against the Straits were diverted to Salonika ; others to the Western front ; others to

Egypt, the security of which was still not sufficiently established, unfortunately, in the opinion of this country.

But the great War as a whole is only concerned with the failure of the Dardanelles as a subsidiary enterprise. What was really towards throughout the lull of the late winter, and was to mark the whole campaign for ever and to decide its final phase, was the great German attack upon Verdun.

ENEMY'S SUPREME EFFORT.

We have just seen what the combined scheme of the enemy was ; how it included political action in the East and coupled with it the design of attempting what must of its nature be the last effort (there would be no effectives sufficient for a second blow) to obtain a decision against the French in the West ; to obtain it before the continued growth of the British forces should render them over-whelming and before Russia should be re-armed. The German Empire, leaving to the Austrians the task of holding the Italians and the South Russian front (where only a small admixture of German troops was

lent to the Austro-Hungarians), keeping upon the Northern Russian front under Hindenburg the strict minimum necessary to hold it through the conditions of winter and the spring thaw, when a bare total of two men to the yard was thought sufficient, began to concentrate all its strength for this last possible decision. If it should fail, which was not thought possible, the war was certainly lost. All was done to make it succeed.

VERDUN.



The point chosen for the attack was the sharp salient formed by the French trenches round the town of Verdun. The time fixed was the latter part of February. Difficult as the task would be under the weather conditions of that season it was believed necessary to act so early because the re-armament of the Russians, though proceeding faster than the Germans imagined, would begin to be formidable when the Russian Ports of the north were free from ice ; the growth of British armament was apparent and, most important of all, the enemy's one asset, his superior

power of munitionment, especially for heavy pieces, was gradually disappearing.

PREPARATIONS FOR ATTACK.

We have seen that corps were specially called back to the interior of Germany for reposing, training and even feeding calculated towards the end in view. Light railways were built upon every side. Heavy artillery was concentrated to the number of over one thousand pieces—all that could be spared—and slowly massed in the woods by Spincourt, and an immense head of shell accumulated during the four winter months. The unfit were thoroughly combed out and every possible man taken to swell the German effectives. Class 1916 after some four months training were sent forward to the local depots behind the front with the object of throwing it into the fighting the moment the losses should become serious. Class 1917 began to be called out (in the month of December). On the 19th of February, 1916, the first shots of the intensive bombardment against the Verdun sector were fired, and on Monday the 21st of February the great German offensive was launched.

GOOD TACTICS AND BAD STRATEGY.

The point upon which it was delivered was as well-chosen tactically as it proved strategically to be ill-chosen. The French forces in front of Verdun held lines turning a sharp angle, almost a right angle that is, in the shape of an L. Cutting across those lines was the Valley of the River Meuse, suffering from winter floods and impassable over stretches varying from half a mile to a mile in width. If in this new offensive the foot of the "L" could be broken in, there would surely follow a local disaster. The troops beyond the flooded Meuse would be crushed back upon that obstacle with not sufficient means for withdrawal beyond it. They would fall *en masse* into the hands of the victor, who pressing forward thence, would have before him a congested line fallen into chaos and disarray with the imperfect and crowded retirement of those defeated beyond the river.

HOW FRANCE PARRIED THE BLOW.

What caused the enemy's plans to miscarry was partly the very thin covering line which the French tactic uses, partly

the extremely rapid concentration which the French effected to meet the new blow. For the rest the German effort proceeded upon the lines laid out for it. The head of shell accumulated was so enormous that the first intensive bombardment could be succeeded by others and yet others continuously for a period of many months, and though there would be lengthening intervals between each deluge of shell, wave upon wave of effort could be launched for an almost indefinite period. Had the enemy not pinned himself so exclusively to the superiority of his heavy pieces; had he depended more upon the value of his infantry, he might have reached his goal. As it was he conspicuously failed. In the first six days he pressed forward over a belt of country varying from two to four miles in depth. He took more than 8,000 prisoners (he announced 16,000, but he included therein as is his custom, all losses whatsoever suffered by his opponent). He put out of action and captured a total of field pieces more than seventy. But he did not crush back the mass of the French forces against the river. He was checked at the French second position which follows a rim

of heights from three to four miles round the town, and from this line he advanced only in the most painful fashion and only in certain narrow sections, meeting with a resistance which clearly showed the difference between the quality of the two infantries opposed.

THE METHOD OF ATTACK.

There have been considerable but futile discussions upon whether the enemy maintained throughout his effort against the sector of Verdun his old doctrine of the close formation or no. Those in the thick of the fighting who could bear testimony appeared themselves to differ upon the point. But the difficulty is resolved at once if we consider what the method of German attack had become.

A MASKED COLUMN FORMATION.

It is true that after each bombardment the enemy now sent forward small bodies in very open order who were no more than scouts, who should test the effect of the bombardment and see whether it was possible for the main body to advance. It is true that when the main body advanced it

advanced in successive waves from 70 to 150 yards apart, and that in each of these waves, especially in the first batch, a certain openness of formation existed. But the characteristic of all the German offensives was that however masked by recent developments, the formation was still a column formation. Let me give a typical example drawn from an attack which was very thoroughly noted and analysed for the French authorities in the middle of the business.

Two divisions were launched against a particular sector of the French lines. These two divisions numbered 18,000 to 20,000 bayonets of actual combatants in the attack. Six regiments were the units involved, each of three battalions. Against what front did this considerable force act? Against a front of no more than 1,500 yards.

Each division lay in depth, one to the right, one to the left. In each, the three regiments, of which each was composed, stood one before the other. In the foremost regiment of each, one battalion of the three which composed the regiment was in the van and of each of these two

battalions which formed the spear-heads, as it were, of the deep divisional formation, a company, say from 200 to 250 men was thrown forward ; a second company immediately succeeding it in a second wave.

Observe the result. You have indeed not a dense formation attacking, but a reasonably open order of about 500 men advancing against 1,500 yards of line. Behind them comes the second wave of another 500. The impression of open order is maintained. But the assault is continued with further and further fragments successively detached in this fashion from the column formation behind and the total result after many hours of such efforts, by which time the whole of the effectives present have been brought into play was, in effect, that two great columns had been launched in a density of from 12 to 15 men a yard.

THE RATIO OF LOSSES.

In the rare cases when such attacks succeeded the cost of the result was heavy enough ; in the much more numerous cases where they failed it

was prodigious, and though the continuous shelling of the French trenches by pieces superior in number and weight to what the French could bring against them cost the French a high proportion in dead, yet the total losses of opponent and defender remained throughout the long story of these operations approximately the same, and in the ratio of two to five. For every two thousand French casualties you may reckon about 5,000 German. The calculus is not by this time based mainly or even partially upon conjecture. The French Intelligence is now possessed of so many documents captured from the enemy ; has been able to identify so many units ; to follow their movement, disintegration and recruitment, as to render this estimate certain within a small margin of error.

A GERMAN DISASTER.

It was this prodigious expense in men which gave to the experiment of Verdun after the first few days of its inception the disastrous character which it was to bear for German arms, and to decide all the future course of the war. Two dates in particular should be noted by the

student, a month apart—March 9th and April 9th. The first was the last of the great massed attacks in which the enemy hoped to break in the French lines, although these had rallied and stood twelve days before. The second was the last of the great main actions in which it was hoped no longer to break the French line, but at least to compel its reorganisation in such a fashion as to allow the entry of German troops into the ruined houses lying upon the east of the river and forming part of the municipality of Verdun. It was upon the later occasion with the failure of this general offensive, at the most appalling expense in men, that the Battle of Verdun may be said to be won. It became more and more apparent that the effort was now political. German prestige demanded it. The now flattened salient of this sector was talked of as though it were a fortress suffering investment.

The price paid in military affairs for the error of political digression is invariably severe and usually disastrous. It is that error which explains Napoleon's failure in Spain ; still more his failure in Russia,

and the conclusion of his power. It is that error which has marked successive campaigns throughout history. It was present here at Verdun.

ALLIED WESTERN OFFENSIVE.

The futile and exhausting effort was still in progress when, after a preliminary bombardment of unexampled intensity, the great offensive was launched by the now greatly reinforced and thoroughly munitioned British forces in company with certain French divisions upon their right, along the valley of the Upper Somme. The first blow was delivered upon the 1st of July, and the interest of the war which had hitherto been centred in the long and deliberate defensive of Verdun, while the head of shell and all other preparations were being accumulated upon the Somme, turned suddenly to this new field.

Before summarising briefly the efforts in Picardy I must go back to follow two other events of capital importance, coincident with the German failure before Verdun and indirectly dependent upon it.

A TRENTINO "VERDUN."

The first is the Austrian breakdown in the Trentino, the plans of which had been drawn up in Berlin and the orders for which had emanated from the German and not the Austrian Higher Command ; the second is the breakdown of the Austrian defensive line in the East.

The attack against the Italians in the Trentino was an exact repetition in its details of the attack upon Verdun. But the point to notice is that both blunders proceeded from the same source : The inelastic Higher Command of the enemy with its centre at Berlin.

The Austrians were bidden by the Germans who direct them, to mass the greatest possible number of men and guns against the only part of the Alpine wall where there was sufficiently open country to deploy for several miles in line. Such an opportunity was framed by the tracing of the frontier fifty years ago, which left a peculiar advantage to Austria in this district, thrusting her territories right down to within view of the Italian Plain.

The Austro-Hungarians informed Berlin that the very most they could possibly gather for such an enterprise was 18 divisions. They had behind them only one line of railway running through a narrow mountain alley ; most of the food and all the munitionment for the attempt had to be accumulated for months by this one avenue.

THE PERIL OF ITALY.

Should the attempt succeed, it would have the very decisive effect of cutting the main Italian line of communication. No other army of the Allies was in this situation. The communications of the French, the English, the Russians ran straight back from their lines and were invulnerable ; but those of the Italians were threatened everywhere in flank by the enemy and especially from the Trentino at the two capital points of Verona and Vicenza, which lie on the edge of the Plain immediately under the mountains.

As at Verdun so in the Trentino, four months were occupied in the concentration. As at Verdun so in the Trentino

success must be rapid to be of service, but it was particularly the case in the Trentino because the enormous armies bunched south of the bottle-neck of one single mountain railway could feed only on its accumulated provisions and could not properly be supplied over any great length of time by that one railway alone. On the other hand, as at Verdun so in the Trentino, a rapid success would achieve immediate and grave results.

The stroke could not be delivered until the season was sufficiently advanced for the mountain roads to be cleared of snow. The offensive was launched in exactly the middle of May. It proceeded with difficulty for one fortnight. In the first days of June it had occupied the last upland overlooking the Plain upon the Asiago Plateau. But meanwhile the Italians had with astonishing celerity used their inner lines and brought up a great concentration to hold the rim of the upland. On June 4th it was clear that the Austrians could advance no further. They were hampered in three ways so severely that success was clearly beyond their reach :

In the first place their only two roads and railways for branching down on to the Plain were strongly held upon either flank by Italian forces, which they were unable to break, the one on the Adige, the other on the Brenta valley. In the second place they were coming to an end of their accumulated stock of provisions (though not of munitionment) for their enormous concentration of heavy guns; in the third place they suffered grievously from lack of water. The Asiago Plateau always suffers from this in summer in spite of the melting of the snows upon the mountains, because of its permeable lime stone character. There followed a week of hesitation, when from June 4th to June 11th the new Italian concentration on the rim of the upland basin securely held the enemy and forbade his descent upon the plains and his cutting of the Italian communication.

THE AUSTRIAN BREAKDOWN.

Somewhere about the 15th June the enemy's necessity for a retreat was decided upon. The Austrians could no longer maintain themselves in such vast numbers in these arid uplands. Their

retreat was conducted with skill ; they lost hardly any artillery ; their huge concentration permitted them to cover the falling back with a dense screen of troops. But the falling back was in full swing before the end of the month and the Trentino offensive had failed, as every single strategic plan emanating from the Prussian Higher Command in this war has failed. In a word, the Prussian mind is mechanical, and therefore fails.

The consequences of this particular failure were more immediate and dramatic than any other with the exception of the Marne. The Austrian concentration upon the Trentino had left the southern half of the Eastern or Russian front, that is the half between the Marshes of Pinsk and the Roumanian frontier, limited to the strict minimum necessary and believed sufficient to a defence. The rule of thumb of two men to the yard run had been observed, and upon a line which in all its sinuosities must have counted considerably over 300,000 yards from 600,000 to 700,000 men, mainly Austro-Hungarian but in part German, were stretched in a cordon.

BRUSSILOV'S BLOW.

The Russian General Brussilov attacked that cordon upon June 4th, 1916, after a preliminary bombardment comparable to, but less intense, than the corresponding Anglo-French bombardment upon the Western front in the autumn before. The Austrian line gave way. A huge gap opened in it in front of Lutsk and another smaller one in front of Czernowitz. Cavalry came into play ; surrenders were free and upon a very large scale. In the very first effort, in the first few weeks, something like half the original force was out of action, and more than a quarter remained as prisoners in Russian hands.

The scale of the disaster, significant as it is, is less significant than the index it formed to the revolution which had come over the whole nature of the war. It was clear that from this moment onwards the enemy had lost his initiative and would now be defending himself against the ever-increasing pressure of the Allies.

The Germans put together every man they could to save the situation. They scraped up altogether the equivalent of

11 divisions, but the Russian tide, checked spasmodically by such reinforcement, still went on. Even at the moment of writing the fifth of its advances has secured another 40,000 prisoners in a few days, in a local break through in the Lutsk salient, and close upon a hundred guns. A new Russian offensive developed in the centre against Baranovitchi Junction did not reach its objective, but it prevented further reinforcements going down south. A fortnight later, before the end of July, yet another smaller offensive developed in the extreme north in front of Riga and at its first onset acquired a belt of twelve miles from the enemy.

THE GREAT ADVANCE.

It was already clear with the end of June that the whole structure of the Great War had changed, when, with the last hours of that month, there suddenly broke forth the general bombardment along the northern part of the Western front, followed by the Great Offensive, the infantry of which was launched upon the 1st of July in Picardy along the Upper Somme Valley, driving straight at the heart of the main German com-

munications, by which is held the big salient terminating near Noyon which has, for nearly two years put the enemy in occupation of this belt of Northern French territory and of nearly all Belgium.

This offensive is still in progress at the moment at which I write. It has in just four weeks of effort accounted for some 30,000 unwounded or slightly wounded prisoners ; for much more than 100 guns ; for a belt of territory over five miles in its extreme breadth and, what is much more important than any of these numerical and local calculations, it has proved itself capable of continuous effort against all the concentration which the enemy has been able to bring against it. The British who formed the larger part of this offensive have in particular during the last days of it, fought their way up to the watershed beyond which they will be possessed of observation posts and a falling country towards Bapaume. Here, as on the Eastern front, the thing has the nature of a tide halted for the moment, upon lines designed to check it altogether, then overflowing those lines and proceeding to a further advance.

PLIGHT OF THE CENTRAL EMPIRES.

What further fortunes this novel and probably conclusive phase of the war may bring, only the future can show. But the situation is already clear. The Central Empires no longer possess a true strategic reserve ; they can still draft in their class 1918, only part of which has been used as yet by Austria-Hungary, none of which has yet been put into the field by the German Empire. They have a certain number of the balance of classes 1916 and 1917, who have been hitherto put back because they were immature ; they have the convalescents who are released from the hospitals. Their superiority in munitionment has disappeared. They are probably already inferior to the Allies as a whole in this factor ; they must necessarily be inferior to the Allies as a whole in this factor increasing as time proceeds. Their superiority in numbers has long disappeared, and what remaining chance of a decision remained to them has been thoroughly thrown away in the Trentino and at Verdun.

In such a posture we leave the enemy at the close of this second year of the war.

It is not an enviable one. It still admits of large reserves of men as drafts from the categories just enumerated, the convalescents, the German class 1918, part of the Austro-Hungarian class 1918, and certain balances of the hitherto rejected in the classes '16 and '17. But it has against it a numerical tide upon the side of the Allies which is constantly rising, and a power of munitionment upon their part which is rising in even more rapid proportion.

THE DETERMINANTS OF TRIUMPH.

The third year of the war will be determined not by military factors--so far as these are concerned, the issue is now mathematically certain--but by political factors. A complete success depends upon the strict co-operation of the whole Alliance, and in particular upon a determination to exercise a true military execution against the aggressors who, in their original formidable superiority, believed themselves free to break every convention of honour and tradition among Christian men. If through any weakness in cohesion or in sternness of purpose the end

be not achieved, if, though every military factor is now in our hands, a complete victory and complete punishment is not achieved and exacted, we have before us after victory only the recrudescence of struggles in which our civilisation will disappear. There can be no folly more inept in character, more criminal in its ignorance, than the folly of sparing those whom we now hold, or of giving them to believe that the infamies which they do not *threaten* but increasingly *perpetrate* shall go unpunished. The more they fear, not the greater resistance shall we find, but the greater disorder in their plans.

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